A Ragamuffin's Oz

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> *Interviewing Rich Mullins is like looking through a pinhole at the Land of Oz: There's so much color to see and only a small scope of time in which to gather it and ask about the vividness you're peeking at. And just as an encounter in Oz changes the visitor forever, a session with Rich leaves you with fresh focus; you find yourself repeating not "There's no place like home" but "There's nothing like holiness; I need more holy life." In conversation, Rich Mullins is funny and serious, quick to point out his own humanity and surprised if you spot something loftier in him, but above all he is infectiously awe-filled about the God he laughs, writes and sings about.*
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> *Appropriately we talk about that God, in Rich's private Oz in Wichita, Kansas, over Diet Coke and newly hung drywall in his attic apartment. Rich is a student here, and he divides his time between his double-major in music and education at Friends University, playing the French horn in his school's pep band, visiting recently married cohort Beaker, constructing and painting his apartment, wrestling with a golden lab puppy named Stevie, and working his artistic way with thoughts and words and music.*

Liturgy, Legacy, and Ragamuffins

> *First we get his thoughts about his latest project, A Liturgy, a Legacy and a Ragamuffin Band. So what's with the title? "It was just a funny phrase if you really want to know the whole truth about it," Rich admits. "It actually was a good idea, [but] I stumbled across the idea after I came up with the title. A liturgy is important to me because more and more I am becoming keenly aware of what a big part of my life ritual is. There are certain things I do every night before I go to bed, and if I do those things I have closure for that day. There area certain things I do in the morning to prepare to face the day. There are things that we [do] - they may be very simple ... But they remain the same."*
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> *In many ways these rituals are much like the prescribed forms of worship,*

or liturgy; that have been passed down for centuries for formal services. "When I go to church, when I go to communion," Rich says, "I involve myself in something that identifies me with Augustine, that identifies me with Christ, that identifies me with nearly 2000 years of people who have come together once a week and said, 'Let's go to the Lord's table and enjoy the feast that he has prepared for us.' In that week I may have been subjected to a million billboards that try to make me identify with the thinking of contemporary society. But once a week I go back to church and [acknowledge that though] the shape of the world is really different now than it used to be, this remains the same: I still come to the Lord's table and say, 'Oh God, if it weren't for your grace, if it weren't for the sacrifice of Christ, my life would have no meaning, no life would have no real substance.' And I do that voluntarily."

Not so with legacy, he explains. "A legacy is something that is passed on to you that you have no control over. I had no say in that my great-grandpa was an alcoholic. I have no say in the fact that my grandpa and grandma moved from Kentucky to Indiana. There are all these things that have shaped me and have some effect on me. There are all kinds of things that are pushed on us and we have no say over. And they shape the way we see everything. Because I grew up in Indiana, in the Protestant tradition, in fact the Quaker tradition - that had a lot to do with biasing me. That's going to have an effect on the way that I interpret the Scriptures; that's going to give me my perspective. And I need to be aware of what my perspective is so I can both appreciate it and be a little distrustful of it."

The album begins and ends with thoughts on the land and legacy that are given him, "Here in America" and "Land of My Sojourn." For Mullins, being an American is an important aspect of legacy that deserves as thoughtful a response as other more personal aspects. His response to being an American in the '90s?

"I don't think you can do anything except love it. And I think love is a lot of hard work. Not so much because things are hard to love but because we're not very good lovers. I think love is something you have to give yourself over to, you have to just finally say, 'I will stop seeking a reason to love something and I will voluntarily allow it to be bigger than I am.'"

Speaking of love, what about the pals who played in the Ragamuffin Band? It all started when Rich read a "refreshing" book called The Ragamuffin Gospel by Brennan Manning, which celebrates the glories of grace and is

written (according to the original forward) "not for the super-spiritual... for the muscular Christians who have made John Wayne and not Jesus their hero," but for "earthen vessels who shuffle along on feet of clay... for smart people who know they are stupid and honest disciples who admit they are scalawags." Rich says Manning's tome "articulated a lot of what I didn't have language for, and the Ragamuffin Band [which includes Jimmy Abegg, Reed Arvin, Billy Crockett and Beaker, among others] was just a group of guys I felt were particularly ragamuffinish."

Meaning? "They're not cute. They're slightly nuts. They have enough of a musical identity that they make lousy studio musicians 'cause they kind of are who they are, and that comes through in what they play. They're guys who have been real honest with me about who they are and about their shortcomings and about their failures and even about their failure to want to do any better. [Because] when I get down to it, the bottom line of every confession I have to make is, 'Lord, I don't really want to love you. I don't even have the desire to do that.' And unless God intervenes, I never will."

A Graceful Pursuit

Grace, God's intervention and his pleasure have been pursuing Rich a lot lately, he says. "I feel it increasingly. The longer I live, the more I have the feeling like God looks down, like when you've just bitten into a vanilla ice cream cone, you just get the feeling God's going 'Yes! He enjoys it, and I made his taste buds and I made vanilla and he's putting it together and he's experiencing what I created him to experience.' The amazing thing about the whole joy of Christianity is it's something you can't find, it's something that has to find you. That once we submit ourselves to God, the things of God chase us down like dogs, and you can't escape them.

"I think we can stifle the Spirit," he continues. "We can thwart the work of God in our own lives. We can choose to nourish that which should be crucified and ignore that which should be nourished, but God ain't done with any of us. In my own life, one of the ways I've seen the grace of God working not only to bring me forgiveness but to bring me real life and to bring me growth, is that I came to a point where I realized, joy wants to live here and I don't have room for joy because I'm full of cynicism. I came to a point where I realized I had to cut out nurturing the cynical part of me.

"I still struggle with that. I haven't successfully become entirely merciful. I

still tend to be very critical of people, projects, of an awful lot that I see, in ways that are embarrassing to me. I wish I weren't like that, but I have the feeling like a hundred years from now, I won't be."

A hundred years from now, what might this ragamuffin's liturgical legacy be? He believes it begins with honesty - hence the confessional nature of his music. "I generally live on the idea that everyone is pretty much the same," Rich says, "and that whatever is true for me is probably true of 90 percent of everybody else in the world." With songs like "Hold Me Jesus" and particularly at concerts, Rich says he's asking the audience, "Don't you ever want to say this, don't you ever want to look up to heaven and say, 'Hold me Christ, I'm shaking like a leaf?' Aren't you tired of being Mr. Together and aren't you tired of healing everybody and aren't you tired of being Mr. Holy Joe? Don't you ever feel like this? And if you can join me and sing here, that will be good for all of us.

"I guess I enjoy a book like The Ragamuffin Gospel not so much because it says anything I didn't know but because it puts into words things that I could never say. That's kind of my goal as an artist.

*"I think in a lot of ways, what I'm hoping to do in a concert, what I'm hoping with this album, with every album is to help [people] come to terms with the fact that they are human, with the fact that they are alive. You hope to challenge people a little bit, [saying] 'You've always seen things this way; look at it *this* way. Not because this way is better than that, but because it's a different view.' I can study the Virginia side of Black Mountain all I want, but there's still a Kentucky side to it, whether I like that side or not, whether I recognize Kentucky as a state or I don't. Things are not flat."*

But Rich will speedily admit that offering his viewpoint and guiding his listeners toward new ones are fallible proposals. "I always try to put Scripture references [in the liner notes of his albums] just because it doesn't matter what I say. I mean, ultimately, I can only tell you about my own experience. As a musician, I don't feel like I am the proper person to give dogmas. I think that what I can give people is an account of my own life, an account of how I've come to where I've come. I put the verses by the songs [to say 'This is where it's taken me but you go back and look at this and see what it says, and let it take you where it's going to take you. Bring your own perspective to this.'"

In other words, what Rich Mullins offers his audience is liturgy as seen

through his legacy - the best, though flawed, that any of us can give. "As a disclaimer to everything I've ever said or everything I ever will say, when it's all said and done we'll only have two things left to say: One is 'Forgive me' and the other is 'Thank you.' If you're really looking for answers, look past me. But if you're interested in how I got to where I am, I will be as honest as possible."

Looking through this pin hole, one might ask, which of the characters of Oz does Rich most closely resemble? All of them. He most certainly has a brain, a heart, courage. And most important of all, he knows where Home - the place of holiness - is.

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